

Utah Legislative Education Task Force, June 26, 2013

Testimony of Greg Bell, Lieutenant Governor, State of Utah

Mr. President, (Speaker Lockhart absent) and Senators and Representatives, thank you for inviting me to speak for Governor's Gary Herbert's administration on what we consider some of the great priorities of our public K-12 education system.

- I. GRADUATION RATES AND QUALITY. First and foremost, the ultimate quantitative measure of our success in public education is that all students should graduate from high school. Our current graduation rate is around 78%, which is completely unacceptable. This means 22% of our students are condemned to life without an education. This is tantamount to personal economic suicide. People without a high school diploma tend to earn far less than their peers, which is often not enough to sustain themselves and their families. High school drop-outs are more than twice as likely to live in poverty as their college-educated peers, more likely to experience government dependency, experience far more unemployment than any other groups, and tend to be incarcerated at staggering multiples of those who finish high school. Although some drop-outs graduate from high school later or obtain a GED, this delay often results in wasted years of productivity, missed opportunities for personal and career development, the inability to obtain higher education, and significant costs to society at large.

Of course, we are also concerned about the *quality* of education our graduating students receive in our public schools. Our goal is for every student to graduate from high school with college and career-ready skills and abilities. This is why Governor Herbert convened his Education Excellence Commission—to emphasize *excellence* in our education system. Utah's employers want graduates who can read and write well, who can reason and show good judgment in the workplace. Currently, we know Utah's curriculum is not sufficiently rigorous and does not produce enough college and career-ready graduates. We need a more demanding set of standards, which are benchmarked nationally and will show how our students fare compared to students in other states.

- II. TEACHER QUALITY AND TEACHER COMPENSATION. Apart from family influences, we know good teachers are the greatest influence in a child's success in education. We policymakers can best apply our attention and State resources in obtaining and retaining the best quality teachers. Compensation heavily influences people in their choice of a career. The starting wage for teachers in many Utah school districts is around \$31,000. This is hardly enough to incentivize many of the best students in college to become educators. Pay increases along the way are also insufficient to allow most teachers to earn a family-sustaining wage, forcing many quality teachers to leave the field or to move out of the classroom and into administration. It is as though we look upon teachers as if they are serving some sort of mission, giving obligatory public service and thus getting low pay for a very difficult job. We expect more and more from teachers; unfortunately, compensation has not increased with our expectations. We need to increase teacher pay to attract many more of our best and brightest college graduates. By doing that, by creating competition for jobs, we will see better teaching quality. Ineffective

teachers will be crowded out. This market-based approach works in every other walk of life. It will, no doubt, work in the teaching profession as well.

- a. We have a critical shortage of math and science teachers. We need to pay more for teachers who have skills which are more in demand. We need to take more of a market approach, as business and universities do, by paying people according to their worth to the institution and the difficulty of hiring equally skilled people.
- b. We need to have our universities align their teacher training programs with what we now need in the classroom, including teaching with technologically-based methods.

III. CAREER AND POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION GUIDANCE. The Governor and I are convinced we need better counseling in junior high and high school, to help students and parents plan appropriate high school courses to reach the student's goals for entering a college or certificate program, with the best background and the most prerequisite courses completed. Guidance counselors and online counseling tools will guide our students to make good career and post-secondary education choices, help them attain scholarships and other aid, and open to them knowledge of education opportunities and careers they wouldn't otherwise get. Without spending a lot of money, we can make a major improvement in outcomes if we develop and use the right technology in partnership with counselors who have the time and training to guide students in these important decisions.

IV. TECHNOLOGY IN TEACHING AND LEARNING. In light of the prevalence of technology in every element of life today and the profound difference technology can make in improving instruction, we must create for students and teachers a technologically rich environment. Students live this way, and they will certainly work in such climates. We believe technology in schools will not replace teachers, but it will:

- a. allow for much more individualized instruction,
- b. provide better metrics of student growth and learning,
- c. allow teachers to do more teaching, and
- d. let today's students learn and perform in media they use almost every other hour they're not in school and with which they will certainly work in their chosen careers.

As with any modern institution, bringing technology into our education system in a comprehensive manner will take major investments both initially and on an ongoing basis for the cost of acquiring and updating hardware and software. We should not be naive about this. We want high-tech tools for many reasons, but we will need to invest in them. There are hurdles: many of our schools aren't wired to support one-to-one devices, nor do they have the wireless capacity to support all the necessary wireless devices. Schools

don't have the technical support available, which is necessary to keep computers and notebooks functioning. Many students don't have computers or access to the Internet at home. We will also need to train teachers in pedagogical methods using electronic tools.

- V. FUNDING. We have to fund education adequately. While research may show that class size within certain limits doesn't matter, at some point, reason and experience tell us children's educational experience must suffer as teachers become overwhelmed by too many students.
- a. Sometimes, members of the Legislature say we are "throwing more money at education." When we are 51st of 51 states, it strains credulity to say we are throwing money at the system. We need to spend education dollars wisely, insist on efficiency in the system, and demand excellent outcomes, *but* we also know you get what you pay for. As I have said, we can affect teacher quality by paying teachers significantly more and paying more for high demand skills and for high quality performance. Acquiring the high-tech tools we need in our schools will bring a sizable price tag. It has been wonderful that our economic growth has allowed us to fund the growth in student numbers to the tune of \$60M per year. But that growth money has merely helped us tread water so new students have a teacher and a classroom.
 - b. We strongly suggest that greater investments in key initiatives in our public ed system will pay off in significantly improved outcomes.
 - c. We suggest we review other sources of revenue, such as the gas tax to see if our gas tax is at the appropriate level to fund roads. We must ask the question, "Are we subsidizing roads at the expense of public education?" And we should also ask if we have achieved the proper balance in funding much of the higher education budget out of the education fund.
 - d. We should also analyze our severance taxes to make sure the State gets an appropriate share of mineral revenue, without stifling our great economy and the robust oil/gas/metals industries.

Thank you for this opportunity to share the Administration's views on these important matters. We wish you well on this task force as you explore these critical issues in public education. We offer you all the research and budgetary analysis resources of the executive branch, should you feel we can be helpful to your efforts in any way. Many thanks.